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Worries from Turkey as it approaches the General Elections

from **Kemal Köprülü**

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2009, I wrote an article for The Brown Journal of World Affairs entitled "Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Foreign Policy"[1].

My objective was to explain the fundamental transformation ongoing in foreign policy and connect this to the AKP driven changes in public opinion and sentiment[2]. I also tried to explain the domestic political consolidation efforts of the ruling party. I wanted this article to be a wake-up call to what was happening on the ground in Turkey.

What I would like to do now is share my thoughts on more recent developments in Turkey, as well as the upcoming general elections scheduled for June 12th.

THE SO-CALLED "TURKISH MODEL"

I fully understand and respect the fact that most of you are concentrated on what is happening in the Middle East/North Africa region. With all that is transpiring, it is difficult for you to concentrate on Turkey. However Turkey's foreign policy and domestic democratic stability have direct ramifications for the course of change in the Middle East and North Africa, and for Western leverage in these regions.

Turkey has been offering itself as a mediator on almost any possible regional conflict. These mediation efforts have seldom produced tangible results and are difficult to measure. By promoting itself as a mediator in the region, the ruling party AKP is able to spin itself as a regional power player, in an effort to create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Showcasing a mediator role is instrumental for AKP's legitimizing moves that distance it from the Western bloc, using the 'neutrality' façade. A mediator must be impartial and cannot represent either side. Turkey made this case as it chose to abstain from the vote on Iran in the IAEA to maintain its neutral role. Subsequently, expanding on its case, Turkey justified voting 'no' in the UNSC. The AKP did not just disregard Western interests but worked against them, indicative of a trend of downgrading the position of the West in this neighbourhood.

While AKP moved forward in its collaboration with Iran, expanding trade and investments, as well as stri-

king new energy deals, no one in the government bothered to note concern with Iran's nuclear ambitions. Public statements made by senior government officials were highly favourable regarding Iran and its President Ahmadi Nejad. Among Turkish public opinion a trend of softening on the Iranian nuclear issue and viewing this issue as a non-threat can be traced. The most recent Transatlantic Trends (GMF) report shows that half of Turks do not see the Iran nuclear issue as a threat. This is partially a result of years of AKP's rhetoric that shaped public opinion. Now that the public is not concerned about Ahmadi Nejad's regime, Turkish public opinion leanings can be used by the Turkish government to justify future policies that contradict Western approaches. The same 'leadership' of public opinion regarding Israel, the US and the EU can be observed. The AKP's vast grassroots political machine has systematically encouraged negative public opinion on these issues.

Due to Turkey's pivotal position, the stance of Ankara makes a real difference. In the days when Ahmadi Nejad had few places to turn to, after the 2009 elections, when he had to stave off his opposition in Iran and faced a solidifying international front against him, the AKP's support lent him credibility. The same type of international cover and protection was also given by AKP to Hamas, then again to the Sudanese and Syrian leaders. A similar stance was taken on Libya's Gaddafi, until AKP realized this was going to result in their ex-

1. "Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Foreign Policy" (available at: <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/509/paradigm-shift-in-turkeys-foreign-policy/>).

2. This article was written not as publisher of Turkish Policy Quarterly but rather representing the personal views of the author.

clusion from international efforts, which was ready to go ahead without Turkey.

The reason for Erdogan acting so promptly regarding Mubarak was that his personal relations were bad and Mubarak's exit played into AKP's regional ambitions. Now, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt sees AKP as their political model and if they come to power, AKP's regional power base supposedly will expand. In short, AKP's positions are determined by personal relations, business interests and regional ambitions of the party – not necessarily the interests of the country.

Several weeks ago, Erdogan said that 'NATO had no business in Libya' and clearly stated Turkey would not sign off on a NATO operation in Libya. The AKP's negotiations in NATO were colored by its anti-France positions and Turkey once again was perceived as a problem-maker. We saw a similar pattern in 2009 when AKP's problems with Anders Fogh Rasmussen led to tensions in the process of his selection as NATO's Secretary General. After a number of flip flops by the government on Libya, there is again disjoint now: several NATO allies are debating arming the Libyan opposition but again Erdogan has come out strongly against this. When Erdogan lashed out last month at the US, NATO and Europe claiming their interests in Libya were only about oil, he failed to explain that Turkey's positions were driven by substantial business interests as well as Erdogan's personal relationship with Gaddafi – which also led him to receive the Muammar Gaddafi Human Rights Award in November 2010.

The UNSC vote on the Libya no-fly zones received no vetoes and five abstentions, barely making it past the required nine votes. Had Turkey still had its temporary seat on the Council, could there have been a veto threat by Turkey, spun again as a necessity for mediation between Libya and the West?

These days when the international community criticizes developments in Turkey, they are confronted with the argument that Turkey is strategically important for the West and angering the government could come with a strategic price tag. Due to rising concerns over the uprisings throughout the North Africa/Middle East region, there is a tendency to immediately draw the so-called Turkish model into the debate. This debate is totally abstract – what aspect of Turkey is referred to as a model is not clear. A similar phenomenon

took place about eight years ago after Sept. 11 when Turkey, and in particular AKP, was deemed a successful model for 'harmonizing' Islam and democracy: the model was named the 'moderate Islam' model and was an integral part of Washington's 'Greater Middle East' project.

It has been exactly five years since Hamas won elections in Palestine. During this period, AKP has consistently offered international platforms and political support, undermining the efforts of others by underlining the need to include Hamas in any negotiations. During this five-year period, has Hamas moderated its positions using the so-called Turkey model? With its self-proclaimed influence over Hamas, has AKP been effective in coercing Hamas into taking any concrete steps forward on international demands?

The Turkey model was never a 'model', rather, it was a formula that worked for Turkey, over time, with trial and error. The Middle East/North Africa region did not start being inspired by Turkey today. This started a long time ago with Turgut Özal. Turkey was debated as a model also for the Eastern European countries as well as the Central Asian Turkic countries. The inspiration was due to Turkey being a predominantly Muslim country, yet firmly secular in its political orientations, a developing democracy, strategically located, and having influence in Western institutions like NATO, as well as EU aspirations, and considerable leverage in Washington. Countries like Azerbaijan that took Turkey's secular system as their model are now trying to fend off the encroachment of political Islamic groups from Turkey.

The Turkey formula developed an entrepreneurial spirit along with a relatively vibrant civil society, largely inspired by European models. Linking Turkey's example to one political party, with an emphasis on Islam, provides grounds for political exploitation. The AKP took advantage of this situation again and declared that the ongoing model discussions were referring to their own political model - and that they could offer a roadmap for regional Islamic political actors. This debate is being utilized by the region's Islamic actors and is harming the parties that do not take Islam as their primary reference. No single political actor can claim to represent the Turkish model – just like the Obama administration does not represent the US model or Nicolas

Sarkozy the French model.

Much of the popularity of the Turkish government in the Middle East today is linked to the stance taken against Israel and in particular Erdogan's scolding Peres in Davos before abandoning the World Economic Forum meeting in 2009. In the Muslim Middle East, this simple act has idolized Erdogan and he has taken advantage of this time and time again. In many cases, this admiration is shallow and does not mean Turkey is in the position to lead these countries through the challenging transitions ahead for them.

In many senses, European countries are better positioned to assist the nations striving for democratic rule and good governance in the region, through the hard work of institution building, fostering structured public participation, and good governance. Turkish businesses and civil society will certainly play an important role. There is, however, only a limited extent to which the AKP can capitalize on satisfying the emotional frustration of the Muslim masses against Israel, after which their position will simply be deemed irresponsible and unsustainable.

Turkey actually was in an excellent position to lead the transformation of the MENA region. However, for five years, the AKP has provided political support and platforms for the thugs and dictatorial regimes of the region. AKP placed all bets on the continuation of status quo and these individuals' rule, and focused on reaping economic and political benefits accordingly. The AKP thus tried to cover up the human rights violations of these regimes.

Now, with the regional uprisings spreading, AKP has cornered itself in terms of its relations with the likes of Ahmadi Nejad, Gaddafi, al-Bashir and al-Assad. By constantly playing to the Arab street and proclaiming regional superiority, AKP brought upon itself the responsibility of assuming leadership for regional events. Talking big brings accountability for acting responsibly and is not the time for abstract claims and empty rhetoric.

Over the past year, the AKP government has been meddling in Iraqi domestic politics, and causing tensions. Considering Turkey has been in the process of normalizing relations with Iraq and has developed economic relations significantly, such political missteps have led Turkey to lose ground. By working against Prime Minister al-Maliki and President Talabani, both of whom

managed to retain their positions in the country, AKP lost credibility – and harmed Turkey's strategic interests. AKP often cites the principle of non-interference in other country's domestic affairs. But this principle is selectively broken and in this case was a badly calculated risk.

THE DETERIORATION OF DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

During this same time period, there has been serious mismanagement of a number of other international issues by the AKP. In a nutshell, the AKP has basically mismanaged almost all things "Western". The AKP has worn out Obama's sincere pledge and outreach for repairing US relations, acted with ambiguity regarding the Armenian reconciliation process, created high levels of mistrust with Azerbaijan, destroyed the Israeli relationship, consistently devised problems in NATO, and now even has serious political tensions with North Cyprus (TRNC).

Perhaps most importantly, the EU accession process is ailing. AKP's relations with France and Germany are probably as bad as they could possibly be. France neglected to invite Turkey to the March Libya summit in Paris, which was to decide on the initial military operations. It seems Erdogan has picked France and particularly its president as his new scapegoat. He earns political points domestically by public verbal attacks on Nicolas Sarkozy. Similar to the Israel relationship, this personalized confrontation will have long-term damages to the bilateral relationship, which is not in the interests of Turkey.

The German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich deemed Erdogan's conduct on his trip to Germany in March 2011 as counterproductive, pointing out that Erdogan had politically manipulated the sensitive integration and immigration issues of Turks in Germany.

Recently, when the new US Ambassador to Turkey commented on the attacks against press freedoms in Turkey, he was harshly criticized by senior AKP officials claiming that this was a local issue and had nothing to do with the Ambassador's job description. Then the Prime Minister tried to humiliate him by saying his remarks were uninformed and amateurish. Domestic issues which are manipulated and politicized by the AKP are conveniently portrayed as 'issues that do not concern international interests'.

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In March, the European Parliament released a report[3] on Turkey which was considered the most critical report ever. Erdogan responded by saying that the report was 'made-to-order,' and that the people who wrote it were 'unbalanced'. AKP leadership efforts to keep international checks and balances at bay are quite clear. They do not want anyone interfering in their ongoing political consolidation efforts.

At the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) meeting on April 13th, Erdogan lashed out at European Parliamentarians challenging the credibility of their questioning press freedoms and election thresholds in Turkey. He noted that personal freedoms was an issue France should judge itself on before looking to Turkey and argued that the election threshold reflected the will of the Turkish people. This is quite ironic, given the election law was made under military rule in 1983, and there was a good opportunity to test whether it conforms to popular will in the constitutional referendum of 12 September 2010. Erdogan's referendum campaign called strongly for accountability of the 1980 military intervention and he could have gained credibility for lowering the threshold.

In its Press Freedom Index[4], Reporters without Borders ranked Turkey 138th in 2010. In 2009 Turkey had ranked 122nd and in 2008, 116th. Over 60 journalists are imprisoned and 500 face judicial prosecution. There are several journalists who have been imprisoned for almost 750 days, as part of the Ergenekon trial, without indictment. The Ergenekon trial is finishing its fourth year and has yet to convict one single person.

A case that originally carried much promise has been badly mismanaged. Erdogan once proudly took ownership of the Ergenekon trials but when the case started to lose both domestic and international support, he took several major steps backward, and declared 'we are neither prosecutors nor judges' of this case.

Unfortunately the drive to punish individuals who cross the new power elite have poisoned the Ergenekon trial process. The wake-up call for the international community should have taken place in April 2009 when the NGO run by the late Turkan Saylan was raided by police and 28 members (all women) of the NGO were detained for four days. The NGO's mission was to educate young girls in Anatolia between ages of 10-15, hardly

a terrorist act! But the crime that those girls were committing was providing an alternative in regions where allies of the government have been consolidating their power base.

This operation created shock and fear among the mainstream NGO community in Turkey. As an NGO activist since 1994 who has encouraged young people to stand up for what they believe and speak forcefully, and who was consistently critical of power structures and government's prior to this government as well, I was disillusioned when the international community did not express concern at this juncture. Today, many people in the NGO world do not send emails, do not talk on the phone and will not write about political issues on their websites, e-groups, or Facebook page. Spring 2009 was a turning point for many of the NGO's which looked to the international community for motivation and support but found none.

In its global 'Democracy Index' study for 2010,[5] the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) has described Turkey as a country with a 'hybrid regime'. The EIU categorizes countries into four areas: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes. With the direction that Turkey is headed, hybrid regime seems to actually look good right now.

The Freedom House 2010 Turkey report[6] rated Turkey as a partly free country with a downward trend. Freedom House has also stepped up its criticism of the AKP's attacks on press freedoms.

According to the 2009 State Dept. Human Rights report[7], 60,000 detainees await trial and statistics show that 50% - almost 30,000 - will be set free. A comparable figure for an EU country would be 5%. Arrests in Turkey are being conducted consistently without proper evidence against the individual involved. The individual is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Turkey is consistently at the top of the list of countries that have cases at the European Court of Human Rights. And all indications point to this only worsening in the upcoming years considering all the violations that are presently occurring in Turkey. The ECHR will soon be flooded with new cases from Turkey and they may need to form a special group of judges for Turkey cases.

On the issue of Gender Gap, the World Economic Index[8] has Turkey ranked 129 out of 134 countries in

3. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0090+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

and
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONGML+MOTION+B7-2011-0156+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>

4. <http://en.rsrf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>

5. http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf

6. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7937>

7. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eur/136062.htm>

8. <https://members.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf>
and
<https://members.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2008.pdf>

2009. Trends are worse as Turkey's 2008 ranking was 123 out of 130 countries. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute's Labor Force study of 2010, the female labor force participation is 27%. Erdogan consistently emphasizes the innate differences between men and women and makes references to women's place in society as mothers and caretakers, going so far as to say that the notion of men and women being equal is senseless, though they should be granted equal rights. This opinion is reflected in the lack of policies designed to integrate more women into the workforce, provide childcare, or legislate a quota for more women to take part in local or national politics. According to the Justice Ministry, the number of women murdered each year increased from 66 in 2002 to over 1000 in 2007 and 2009. The recorded eight-year total is 4063 women murdered.

Turkey is a country where Internet, Facebook, Twitter etc have widespread use. However, on the issue of Internet freedoms, Turkey once again is heavily criticized as being on the most restrictive countries in the world. Over 6000 websites are closed and, for example, YouTube was closed for two years. In Azerbaijan, a country whose democracy deficits the Western world takes every opportunity to criticize, these websites have never been closed.

According to government officials, 71,500 telephones are being tapped legally (approved by judges) in Turkey. How many people are being listened to illegally? What was the process followed to approve the legal wiretaps? And what is being done with all this information that is being gathered?

There are several interesting side notes regarding this wiretapping issue. There are several newspapers in Turkey – all aligned with the government- that have consistently been 'enabled' to publish the wiretappings of individuals - all of whom happen to be opposing the government. No one in the government has said it is illegal or immoral to publish people's personal exchanges. The lack of any principled stance as such instils fear among the public. The ordinary Turkish person sees that it is ok to publish wiretaps that help the AKP's cause and that criticism of the government comes with a price tag of loss of privacy, among other things. Violating privacy is not the only way an individual can be discredited though if they criticize the go-

vernment. He/she can also be accused of taking part in an international campaign to destroy Turkey's image, as the prime minister has claimed in reaction to increasing press freedom criticisms.

The wiretapping issue is intertwined with the suppression of the media but its effects on society are deeper than the media sector alone. It has negatively affected business, civil society, and opinion leaders. Many business leaders in Turkey today do not conduct important business on their phones as they know that this information may be shared. This is a basic freedoms problem, but has consequences also for the economy. TUSIAD Chairwoman Umit Boyner said on a recent television interview that no one uses their phones anymore and leaves their phones outside meetings. Last month, former President Suleyman Demirel came out and said that Turkey's direction is clearly heading towards a 'Republic of Fear'.

Another source of fear for the business community is the subjective tax-fining cases of the finance ministry. Business leaders who are not aligned with the government are extremely worried and fearful of any potential fallout. Therefore, business leaders in Turkey have been very careful about statements regarding the political actions of the government. This is one reason why a large segment of the business community has not been more critical of the government.

The Dogan Group, which was fined over \$3 billion dollars in tax penalties in September 2009, actually won all of its cases against the government in the high court Danistay. So this might be a good time for the international community to send a delegation that could research this entire 18-month process and its effects on politics and society. When the largest media groups are intimidated while the world watches on, it is no surprise that normal individuals do not feel they can be critical.

Several months ago in Istanbul and Ankara, police have beaten up demonstrating students and used gas-sing to subdue them. A 19-year old pregnant female student lost her baby while being beaten by the police. AKP senior officials accused these students of belonging to an illegal gang. At a meeting where the Turkish minister in charge of EU affairs was speaking, a student threw an egg that landed on the minister's lapel. The minister in turn sued the student. A series

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of similar incidents regarding Turkish youth has created fear among students and has discouraged them not to voice their opinions. It is the parents in many cases that are extremely worried of something happening to their son or daughter. If you were a parent in Turkey, under these circumstances, would you encourage your son or daughter to become active in society?

In January at the opening of the new Galatasaray football stadium in Istanbul, the Prime Minister was booed by the fans. After prematurely leaving the stadium, the next day brought very harsh words from Erdogan. Also, there was a collection of security tapes to find out exactly who was booing. The Galatasaray management claimed that those who were booing would be held accountable. What do you do to someone who boos a government official? The exact same thing happened six months ago after the World Basketball Championship finals between the US and Turkey. So now people in Turkey are fearful of booing government officials.

During a trip to Kars, Erdogan saw a large statue – dedicated to cross-border peace, which he deemed 'freakish', and demanded that it be removed. The AKP majority Kars municipality voted and took the decision to remove the statue. Cultural leaders of Turkey protested along with international organizations; one artist protested by taking the issue to court seeking to block its removal. The first round of legal actions was positive, delaying its removal, but the judge heading that court decision was transferred to another province right after his decision. This is but a recent depiction of the ability of the executive to control the judiciary through demotions and re-locations.

There was a demonstration in the North Cyprus in January in which demonstrators criticized the Turkish government's handling of North Cyprus – using daring posters. The AKP leadership immediately responded with harsh verbal attacks. Erdogan angrily asked how a community that 'was being fed' by Turkey could dare to criticize. In March, an even stronger demonstration followed in North Cyprus. This time all political voices in north Cyprus, even political enemies, came together to stand against the AKP.

After the tragic Japanese experience on nuclear facilities, the world public opinion (and Turkey as well) has started asking serious questions about the safety

(Turkey is the centre of earthquake fault lines and 1999 earthquake is not so distant in the past) of these facilities, especially when you are prone to natural disasters as Turkey obviously is. There is constant discussion of when the next huge earthquake will hit Turkey. Turkey and Russia had negotiated and signed a \$20 billion nuclear energy deal.

Many experts question the technology standards of the Russians and wonder if this will be safe for Turkey. Without allowing any kind of debate to further develop, Erdogan went to Russia in March and declared to his close friend Putin that his trust of Russian technology was strong and that the project would continue. Most likely, the world will undergo a serious and widespread debate in the next year or so, possibly deeply affecting the nuclear debate. Perhaps unprecedented technological advances will be a result of this debate. Unfortunately, trust has already been granted to the Russians without the benefit of this debate and Turkish society is left to face the potential dangers. Each day brings more resistance from the Turkish public but to no avail.

THE NEED FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND EUROPEAN UNION TO TURN THEIR ATTENTION : INDISPENSABLE CHECKS AND BALANCES

For a long time the international community resisted acknowledgement of deep-rooted political manipulation of the press in Turkey. First international press watchdogs, then Washington, and finally Brussels has been expressing concerns. An important turning point was 'Black Thursday', which occurred on March 3. After a raid on more than 10 journalists' homes, offices, personal belongings, and tying this to the Ergenekon case once again, finally (but far too late) these actions brought the Turkish media together and for the last four weeks, an unprecedented front has been drawn against AKP's actions by a majority of the mainstream media. Some of the self-described liberal democratic voices in Turkey had been looking for ways to distance themselves from the AKP and a number of these voices have since joined the front against AKP.

This front, which has grown rapidly among concerned individuals in Turkey, has received assistance and support from the international community. Otherwise, it would not have been sustainable for over one mon-

th. The international community must continue to spend more time and energy now on Turkey, and research these concrete negative trends and their societal effects. This is an extremely critical period as we head toward elections in June. For years, minority groups faced persecution due to this system today the circle of victims has only become even wider, under the disguise of progress.

If the public is systematically being fed misinformation, how can you call Turkey's election fair in terms of competition? If pro-government media has privileged access to information, and is encouraged by the government to use this information against its enemies and media competitors, will this not prevent opinion leaders from becoming involved? If Turkey's judiciary system continues to be exploited by the executive, how can government critics preserve a sense of security?

Some of the press have taken to satire in order to inform the public about Erdogan and the AKP. Burak Bekdil's work is an excellent example of this. The journalists may think that being satirical may be 'allowed' under the present 'rules of the game'. But Erdogan's constant occupation of slamming cartoonists and taking them to court should not be forgotten.

In a recent case^[9], a Turkish prosecutor tried to track down an email address linked to cartoons about Erdogan and requested from the US Justice Department assistance in tracking down this email address distributing the cartoons as well as the computer linked to the email address. US Justice rejected the request citing freedom of speech being a constitutional right in the US. Once again, the extent of stamping out opposition, even cartoons, anywhere is evident.

Can Dunder, a leading columnist and anchorman in Turkey, wrote in March that the formation of this front was a long-time coming and also much too late. He said this should have started years ago with all the government manipulation of media, threats, taxes, firings, etc. Everyone knew what was going on and who was doing what but there was the fear and hesitation to write or talk about it. People tried to pretend that these things did not exist. Now, there are people stepping up and taking the lead.

Semih Idiz, a very well respected columnist, said in a recent column^[10] that it is up to the international community to bring checks and balances to Turkey

immediately, and that they should start by tackling the attacks against press freedoms in Turkey. He underlines that, domestically, Turkey does not have the ability to do this anymore. A prominent journalist Nurray Mert left a recent column empty, claiming that if she did not have freedom of expression, then there was nothing to express.

Our European colleagues are starting to be much more helpful. The EU accession process being stalled was a win-win for critics in the EU as well as for the AKP for a long time. Turkey-sceptic Europeans were pleased that the deadlock in the process and the antidemocratic trends in Turkey would push Turkey away. This would be their 'out' and plausible excuse for being able to tell their constituencies and the world that this could not work.

The EU disappointed many Turks with its failure to monitor on-goings in Turkey, not raising red flags at critical junctures or standing up for the rights of those who felt their space for meaningful participation was narrowing in the country. Many of us expected critical backing from European counterparts – such as support in bringing the 10% election threshold down. This could have been achieved during the last referendum if significant voices in the EU had made it a deal-breaker for their support of the referendum as a whole. This was a perfect opportunity wasted.

The AKP leadership needed the EU process until 2005 for its own power consolidation, but in my opinion, never intended to take it all the way. This allowed them to blame prejudice against Turks, in particular by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, for the problems. The Turkish public readily bought into this line and EU support dropped considerably in a short period of time.

AKP took advantage of the fact that the Turkish opposition was playing the nationalist card to make the Europeans believe that Turkey's European future depended on AKP's continued power. Through this argument they were able to fend off criticism by the EU, and prevent a real system of checks and balances from being established.

Due to the increasing trends of inconsistencies and deepening problems, there are now serious doubts in the EU about the government's intentions. Contributing to this shift is the change of leadership in the main opposition party, CHP. The positions of the new CHP

9. <https://www.turkishpolicy.com/news/226/hdnus-refuses-to-help-turkey-track-political-caricaturist-28-march-2011/>

10. <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/dis-mudahale-artik-sart-oldu/semihidiz/siyaset/>

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leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu are demonstrating to Europeans that the alternative to AKP is not the curtailing of freedoms, but may indeed be more genuine Europeanization. Under a continuation of AKP government, Turkey's EU objectives will be unattainable.

The EU is an instrument only brought into the fold when it serves political interests of the government. Because of the support for the process among the liberal progressive Turks, it served as a lifeline of credibility for AKP. The last time it was utilized was during the referendum of constitutional changes which the EU applauded and which assisted the AKPs domestic political consolidation. The next time the EU is likely to be utilized by AKP is in the next referendum (after the upcoming elections). If the party does not possess the majority needed to change the constitution (367 seats), it is likely that they will again combine several EU reforms with reforms for a presidential system. With a presidential system, Erdogan will have total control until 2024 and will not need the EU.

Erdogan speaks openly of his desired Presidential system and a two party parliament. Such a structure will mean unchecked power for AKP. Today there is no clarity as to whether Turkey's President Abdullah Gül's term ends in July 2012 or July 2014. Keeping this issue ambiguous clearly serves some kind of purpose.

Our EU colleagues should pay closer attention to this potential referendum which is likely to be adorned with rhetoric about advancing EU-motivated democratic ideals.

On March 24th, three weeks after the journalist arrests created this tremendous reaction, an unprecedented scandal took place regarding press freedoms and human rights. The police raided Radikal newspaper, which had digital copies of a yet unpublished book written by one of the arrested journalists, Ahmet Sik. The police have stated that whoever has copies of this book or partial excerpts will be prosecuted for assisting terrorists. For the last several weeks, this issue has become a topic for discussion around the world. Each day brings new amazement as to what can happen next. [11]

Though the press has lashed out at the arrest of their colleagues, this reaction will weaken with pressures. There is presently an opportunity to call for the accountability of the government on a number of issues.

If progress, with the help of the international community, can be made on press freedoms, perhaps this will empower other critical platforms. For example, Bar Association leaders have recently been making strong statements about the weakness of rule of law in Turkey and stating that the legal system is in disarray, susceptible to political manipulations., International Bar organizations would do well in coming to Turkey and researching/reporting the on-goings and supporting their colleagues.

There are a few dimensions to the systematic attack against certain institutions and individuals. One is simply the intolerance to criticism – and the prime minister taking political disapproval as a personal offence. Another is vengeance of the 90s when barriers were placed in front of the Islamic movement, including persecutions such as the prime minister serving 4 months jail time for reciting a poem. Today the AKP establishment is motivated by revenge – sometimes openly stating that they were subject to pressure and human rights violations in the past, thus there should not be criticism of what is going on now.

Much more positive change could have taken place in Turkey during the last ten years. The priorities of the AKP government have been wrong and energies have been wasted on unnecessary issues. Vengeances of past politics and efforts to gain the Arab street have detracted from the energy that could have been spent on catapulting Turkey to a higher league of democracy. This is also true for the Kurdish problem - for which the deserved political capital has not been spent, while the government has expended leadership for other polarizing issues less central for the country's democratic development. In fact many of the initiatives central to Turkey's democratization have fizzled – ranging from those expanding the rights of Kurds and Alevis, to coming to terms with the history Armenians in Anatolia. Though the rhetoric and stated goals of AKP on these fronts were celebrated by democrats in the country and observers in the West, this celebration was clearly premature as the government did not follow through with the initiatives and reverted back to past paradigms.

It is true that growth has been strong (5.83% between 2003 and 2008) and that this increases Turkey's regional and global pull. But economic numbers should be put into perspective. In the so-called 'lost 90's'

11. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=from-the-bosphorus-straight---turning-into-a-dystopian-society-2011-03-27>

from 1992-2002, the economy grew at a yearly rate of 3.12%. In the Özal years of 1983-91, 5 % growth was the norm. Post-war growth since 1950 on average has been 4-5% annually. When you consider the considerable development of international finance and the abundance of funds in the earlier part of this decade (until 2008), 5.83% by AKP is not outstanding. Commendable yes, but not outstanding.

This growth is much a virtue of the confidence of investors in a country on the track of EU accession – a process now in question. Is this growth sufficient to cover up all these other weaknesses that I have mentioned? I doubt it. Eventually, these problems will seep into the business world and create higher political risk and cause investors to hesitate. Until now, the international financial sector has managed to keep Turkey's political risks at a minimum by underlining political stability as an asset. They have carefully avoided putting the entire picture out for all to judge. Should political tensions create any overreaction, then there will be increases in political risk.

Since the international crisis of 2008, the AKP has consistently praised Turkish banks as positive examples in the financial world by underlining their strengths and readiness for crisis situations. The first true sign of tension between the government and the banking sector recently became evident as Is Bank CEO Ersin Özince stepped down from his position after a verbal spat with Economy Minister Ali Babacan[12]. Babacan, who has been trying to persuade banks to limit their loan growth, said the government 'does not wish to take police-type measures' against banks that do not cooperate. All significant sectors in Turkey now feel the shadow of AKP's interference and the effects of these trends will have economic consequences.

THE GENERAL ELECTIONS OF JUNE 12TH: WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The general elections in Turkey will be held on June 12th. My worst case scenario for Turkey would be an AKP that gets close to the majority of 367 seats required for constitutional change. The second worse case scenario would be an outright AKP majority. For a multitude of reasons, Turkey needs a coalition. If you look at Turkey's most advanced election simulation game created by the ARI Movement[13], you can put in fi-

gures for the three parties expected to pass the threshold as well as the independent Kurdish MP's to get to 100%. During the 2007 elections, this site received well over one million hits and the media constantly referred to this game in their columns and news articles. For example, if you give 39% to AKP, 33% to CHP, 14% to MHP and 7% to BDP, (with the remaining 7% spread between other parties) the result will be 273 for AKP, 185 for CHP, 61 for MHP and 31 independents for BDP. This would seem to be close to critical levels for AKP as these results will not allow it to form a government by itself.

In any case, support for AKP in Turkey seems to have passed its peak. In the meantime, CHP is now taking steps that would be expected from a strong and responsible opposition, and putting forth progressive policies and projects. It is often difficult to predict elections in Turkey but most analysts have assumed an outright third single party term for the AKP. In such a case, rising tensions within Turkey and in Turkey's relations with the West can be expected.

The space for political competition in Turkey is dissipating and should the AKP gain a third term outright, the ongoing consolidation of domestic political power will continue to marginalize political space even further. The Turkish media has been seriously compromised with bullying and threatening from government representatives over the years and as a result, the Turkish public has often not heard information they would need to make informed judgments. The frustrated individuals in the media finally started speaking out more openly with the emotional environment brought about with the arrest of their colleagues. It is now more openly being discussed that the government has systematically attacked and suppressed not just the media, but civil society, and the business world. The judicial system has been compromised. University students, the cultural community and sports fans have been intimidated.

It is time to stop pretending that these things are not happening in Turkey, or that they do not warrant attention. What the Turkish people are led to believe and want goes far beyond Turkey's own geography. Because Turkey has influence on the region, through its developed entertainment, information, business and cultural outreach, Turkey's rising anti-Western

12. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkey8217s-top-banker-resigns-after-criticizing-minister-2011-03-31>

13. http://bilinclioy.com/index_eng.htm

tendencies have a far-reaching effect. Two years ago, most analysts were claiming that with Obama taking office and the EU process continuing, Turkey's Western orientation (and lowering of anti-Americanism) would be restored. This has not occurred.

Concerns about angering Erdogan are guiding what is said inside Turkey and towards Turkey from abroad. Erdogan's utilization of intimidation has proved effective not just domestically but internationally as well. The AKP is often insecure about its domestic and international actions – even though they try to portray confidence. If the AKP trusts itself, its policies and its actions, then why expend so much energy and go to such lengths to ensure that the playing field is as unfair as possible? Why not simply trust your instincts and allow for public and international opinions to follow suit? For the last five years, Turkey has been mismanaged. AKP's mismanagement has ranged across many domestic and international issues. Had concerned intellectuals/activists in Turkey and the relevant circles of the international community been more vocal about the growing problems in Turkey over the past 2 or 3 years, public opinion in Turkey would already be more attentive to these issues. As it stands, the negative effects of these mismanaged fronts have only recently begun to surface. Though the consequences have begun to trickle down to public opinion, it is probably not likely that drastic changes will be reflected in the upcoming elections. Moreover, the AKP is expending much effort to hide its failures and over-spin achievements.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's leading problem is the weakness of checks and balances. With domestic separation of powers faltering, and with confidence in public support, the AKP is only responsive when strong international pressure

is combined with vocal domestic reactions. And that is exactly what happened recently as AKP succumbed to the coming together of these pressures by having to change the special prosecutor of the Ergenekon case, Zekeriya Öz[14]. These domestic pressures can be mitigated with consistent attention from our Western friends in the form of checks and balances, and demands for accountability and transparency. The international community must stay engaged with Turkey on these issues.

The last 5 or 6 weeks was an excellent example of issue-based cooperation that is successfully 'checking' AKP on the issue of press freedoms. It was critical that political pressure was exerted by Washington, Brussels and other capitals. In order for domestic outcry to deliver results, it is vital that it is combined with international political pressure. This pattern will be the key for checks and balances in Turkey. The international community needs to send delegations as well as informal groups to analyze realities on the ground in Turkey. They need to meet with unofficial people in informal environments to be able to speak freely, off-the-record.

The last few years have brought about serious tensions between Ankara and Western capitals, as well as significant polarization within Turkey. For the long-term interests of both the Transatlantic bloc and the Turkish people, it is important that Turkey's counterparts in the West distinguish between Turkey and the party leading it since 2002. It would be a serious strategic mistake on the part of Western leaders – as well as non-Western leaders- to equate Turkey and its potential to the current political leadership, or for that matter, any other particular political current. A deeper understanding of the country is warranted.

14. <http://bianet.org/english/politics/128981-zekeriya-oz-deposed-as-special-authority-prosecutor>



Author : Kemal Köprülü

Kemal Köprülü is a founder of the ARI Movement, and served as its Chair for 10 years (1995-2004). He held a managerial position at Citibank and served as Senior Vice President of Interbank. He serves on the advisory board of Turkish Policy Quarterly

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